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ABSTRACT

Since 1979, over 300 adults have participated in writing anxiety workshops at Northern Virginia Community College. The self-identified, self-diagnosed sufferers of writing anxiety have had problems in one or more of the following areas: letter writing, memo and report writing, writing for academic purposes, writing demanded of women reentering the work force, and writing required by new jobs. The 6-hour workshops were attended by 10 to 20 participants, who learned coping skills to deal with their writing anxiety. During the workshops, the first 2-hour session was devoted to identifying individuals' writing problems and explaining that writing causes anxiety because it is a reflection of personal reality, requires decision making, and involves hard work. In the second session, participants practiced pre-writing techniques, such as brainstorming, free-writing, and questioning, and discussed such organizational concerns as unity, coherence, order, and transition. During the final session, students implemented revising and editing techniques. A follow-up study using the Thompson Writing Attitude Survey demonstrated the effectiveness of the workshops in reducing writing anxiety. The survey instrument is appended. (LL)

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A WORKSHOP:

COPING WITH WRITING ANXIETY

by

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Annandale, VA

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Adapted from a paper presented at
a Post-Conference Workshop
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Since early 1979, I have been conducting Writing Anxiety workshops for adult writers. The workshops became so successful that The Washington Post featured them in their running series on "Coping."[1]

More than 300 adults have participated --people from many walks of life: academia, business, government, science/research, and free-lance writing. They come to the class as self-identified sufferers of writing anxiety. Sometimes they don't even know what the term means to me, the professor. They perhaps have responded because of promotion articles in the press that describe anxious writers as those who procrastinate writing, who avoid writing, who submit their writing late. They perhaps have merely responded because the College flier has come into their home, advertising a low-price, low-pressure, community service, non-credit course for writers with problems. The important thing to note is that workshop participants are self-diagnosed.

Of all 300, I've never had a certified "bad writer" and yet, ususally they have identified themselves as close to that --or at least "problem writers." These problems have varying centers:

Letter Writers: One woman had been elected state president of a national volunteer organization. She could make speeches easily, but at the time of the class, she felt she would have to resign the post, denying herself the honor because she couldn't write the business letters required in her new position. An entrepreneur had lost business rather than write cover letters for his well-written business proposals. Several participants hadn't written letters to family members for years, and were alienating loved ones.

Memo and Report Writers: One man was considering changing his government job, so frustrated was he that supervisors didn't like the reports he filed

twice a month. Bouncing the reports, bloody with red ink, one supervisor said he needed "to write for a more general audience"; another said he needed "more technical language." A woman researcher for a senate committee had sleepless nights because the senators needed memos "yesterday," and she couldn't produce fast enough. A research physicist acknowledged that his well-written reports, which he liked to write, were always finished one or two weeks late. A technical writer with a large corporation could easily accumulate masses of information, but couldn't get it organized.

Academic Blockers: Many Ph.D. and M.A. candidates came to cope with their severe block writing the dissertation or thesis. Some were finally up against the deadline, the last year of the last extension but still couldn't write --counterproductive indeed. College students came to see if there was any way to reduce the number of agonizing hours they spent on term papers.

Re-entry Women: One woman had a degree in journalism, but had been out of the work force for ten years and now found, as she faced re-entry, that she could no longer write. Another woman, in full mid-life crisis, was panicked about writing in her new career as a free-lance feature writer. Several women came for help writing term papers for courses towards their B.A. One woman had been successful as a medical writer but was now blocked as she attempted to write her first novel.

New Jobs: Several participants were working on their first job out of college. While they always got "A's" on college writing, they were giving themselves "F's" on their business writing. One man recently changed jobs and found that instead of hands-on engineering, he was designing projects that required written reports. He was furious. After all, he had gone into engineering to avoid writing. But he wanted to keep the more lucrative new job.

Gradually these people began to cope with their problems through the course "Coping With Writing Anxiety," a six hour workshop spread over three weeks for ten to twenty participants.

The first two-hour session is devoted to "confessions," from group members, of their writing problems. I begin by talking about my own writing problems and cures, my procrastination (cured by behavior modification techniques), my reliance on "which clauses," and my spelling difficulty with double-letters (not cured --just coped with). As each participant reveals a problem, I comment and suggest methods for curing or coping. Many problems are shared. As each person talks, sympathetic nods of agreement go around the room reassuring the speaker immediately that he/she is not alone.

Early in the course I introduce the idea that writing creates anxiety because it reflects a personal reality. Words on paper are our creations --our babies. If, as you were pushing your baby in a stroller at the shopping center, a passerby said, "that baby is all wrong for the world --it's ugly--rub it out," you would never show your baby in public again. And so it is with words. "The Word" is revered in our culture. To create such revered objects is to create anxiety.

We then go on to discuss the general reality that writing involves deciding, "This idea, not that one. This word, not that one. This sentence structure, not that one." Any decision-making process brings anxiety. We must accept the anxiety as part of the game and go on. But I insist that no writing be thrown out; it should be set aside, perhaps put into files. No work should be erased, just crossed out with a thin line. If writers can feel that all work is valuable and retrievable, they will not be as anxious about the decision.

We reaffirm that writing is hard work. Writers should respect their profession and diligently set up the necessities for work. Almost universally, anxious writers assume that their writing is not important. They haven't given

themselves permission to write. They may be trying to produce in a noisy bullpen office where phones ring, typewriters clack, and colleagues interrupt. They pursue a free-lance career from the corner of the kitchen table, only to interrupt themselves for all family demands and, of course, to clear it all away three times daily. Students feel writing should be done in its place, after Math or Science homework. All participants know that surgeons easily demand a sterile, well-equipped, silent room in which to carry out their important job, but few writers demand that supervisors and families give them a quiet "room of their own." It's amazing how writers will deny themselves! We remind ourselves to get the #2 pencils, yellow pads, a good dictionary, and to save up for the Selectric typewriter and comfortable chair. It's also important to know at which time of the day we write best. And I mention the concept of "white noise" that which blocks out disturbing noise. (For me, it is a pilot razor-point pen, a white lined pad, at night, at my 4' long desk in my home office, where I have reference materials and files at hand, and "dentist" music on the stereo.)

Discussing shared problems alleviates many symptoms of writing anxiety: we all laugh with each other over the sleepiness, hunger, "tics," the need to go to the bathroom when we sit to write. But during the confessions of the first class, I also suggest techniques for coping with particular manifestations of anxiety.

The new president of the volunteers, the engineer, the people on new jobs, and the medical writer-turned-novelist, were suffering from the anxiety produced by changing modes of communicating. They needed to know there are models for different modes of writing --and not being mysterious, they can be learned. I often direct them to special courses.

The letter writers, and the government writer suffered from anxiety because they couldn't identify their audience. I ask participants to write a specific description of the audience for each writing task. Writing that description

on a file card to keep in front of them while they are writing gives the audience physical properties, producing less anxiety. The bureaucrat needed to help his many supervisors identify his audience more specifically. His anxiety was appropriate.

The scientist, the senate writer, the academic writers, and most of the re-entry women were afflicted by a peculiar form of perfectionism that attacks writers. Carrying around powerful inner dicta from early experiences, they labor to perfect their work before submitting it. They may be frantically revising and editing that all-important first sentence, or first paragraph, or continually adding new topics as they go along, or re-reading their writing, or constantly doing more research. They waste so much time that they miss deadlines. Reaffirmation that no writing is ever perfect helps. These writers learn most from understanding the revising and editing place in the writing process.

During the course, the senate staffer, the re-entry women, and first-job people were helped to understand that generalized anxiety often is focused onto writing because of its high-pressure nature. They needed to think about working on a stress-reduction program, or possibly changing jobs.

Most of the first two hour session is consumed with these discussions. If there is any time left, I talk about the three-step writing process: pre-writing, writing, revising. I may even introduce some pre-writing techniques.

Participants leave the first week with "worksheets" on which they write "I promise myself this week to write _____." The worksheets list thirty statements of feelings they might experience when they attempt to keep the promise (Appendix A). In checking one or several feelings, participants begin to evaluate their writing problems more realistically and

and to narrow the anxiety field.

During the second session, the participants practice pre-writing techniques such as brainstorming, free-writing, and questioning. I then distribute hand-outs on organizational techniques such as unity, coherence, order, transitions — practically an entire freshman composition course on three sheets. We leave time to go over their "worksheets." Most participants are then able to narrow their anxiety to such statements as "I have trouble starting," or "I can't organize," or "I feel inadequate about skills."

During the third session, the participants practice revising and editing techniques. They are reassured to know there is a specific list of qualities that they can look for in their writing. I ask them to make their personal lists of editing quirks (remembering my own "which clauses" and double-letter spelling). I emphasize they should revise for one item at a time and plan a time lapse between final revision and proofreading. Finally I review proofreading techniques. And again, we review their worksheets. By then I often hear participants saying positive things like "I have confidence in my skills," or "I can really get organized," or "I don't have trouble starting." The negative aspects of writing begin to take a back seat to the positive ones.

At the end of the course the volunteer president sent out her first general letter to the membership, and one man wrote to his father for the first time in two years. The senate staffer speeded up her work, and decided to deal with the pressure. The scientist also began to work faster, but wishing to preserve a degree of perfectionism, he set a new schedule for himself. The medical writer abandoned her novel as "no fun," and returned to medical writing. Some re-entry women decided to enroll in a composition course. Many participants figured out they were lazy and had been unaware of the work involved in writing.

At the beginning of the workshops, I administer the Thompson Attitude Survey

(Appendix B).[2] About two years ago I conducted a small follow-up study on 93 students, whose range of scores had been from 57-129, with a median of 91 and a mean of 91. On a 30% return, for n=31, the paired scores look like this:

	Entering	6 months or more after workshop
range	59-125	54-113
mean	93.25	83.62
median	90	84

The entering scores of those returning the follow-up survey parallel closely the scores of the whole sample, so it is probably a good indication of how others might have reported. Comments on the surveys included "The best thing I learned was to free write." "After I told my secretary to hold the phones for an hour, I got down to my writing easier [sic]." I figured out my boss's writing style from his files, and now he thinks I'm a good writer... thanks." "I still procrastinate, but I don't think I'm a bad writer anymore." "I don't begrudge 9 hours on a paper anymore."

I believe these workshops are effective. They have also taught me a lot about how people write in the real world where audiences and purposes are identifiable, where writing models are effective means for learning, and where things like having a quiet time for the difficult job of writing are still true.

ENDNOTES

[1]James T. Yenckel, "Careers: Axing Writer's Block," The Washington Post, 12 June, 1980, Sec. D., P. 5, col 1. It is to a discussion of these workshops that Pearl Aldrich was referring in her article "Adult Writers: Some Reasons for Ineffective Writing on the Job," College Composition and Communication, 33(October 1982), 287.

[2]Merle O'Rourke Thompson, "The Development and Evaluation of a Language Study Approach to a College Course in Freshman Composition," Diss. The American Univ. 1978, p. 93.

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APPENDIX A

WRITING ANXIETY WORKSHOP

DATE: _____ NAME: _____

Charting your attitudes and feelings as you write may help you focus on particular areas for your special attention.

First, fill out your writing intentions as a promise to yourself. You can promise anything: 10 minutes per day in your journal, Chapter 3 on your dissertation, the memo required a week ago, etc.

****

* I promise myself to write _____ *

****

Second, as you approach the writing task, try to observe your feelings. Below is a list of some observations you might have. If you experience the feeling check it. Then make a comment if one is appropriate. You might comment "rationalization," "silly," "I quit," "I got over the feeling in a few minutes," etc. Don't spend too much time on the form. Don't use the form as another means of procrastinating. Use it to focus attention on your problem.

	I experienced this feeling	Comments
1. I avoid the writing task.		
2. I do other things, rather than writing.		
3. I put it off until the last minute.		
4. I put if off until it is too late.		
5. I don't have privacy to write.		
6. I don't have adequate space to collect my materials.		
7. I don't feel as if I have found my writing rhythm. (what time of day is best for me to write)		
8. I don't feel I have the right to write.		

	I experienced this feeling	Comments
9. I feel other tasks should have priority over my writing.		
10. I feel others write much better than I do so I feel inadequate.		
11. I feel others write more easily so I feel inadequate.		
12. I feel that my grammar is poor and so I feel inadequate.		
13. I feel my writing is dull, so I feel inadequate.		
14. I don't feel able to find enough information.		
15. I feel I have to do more research.		
16. I don't know what to write about.		
17. My project is long, and I don't know how to break it into manageable parts.		
18. I don't like the writing task.		
19. I find it hard to concentrate.		
20. I feel too tired to write.		
21. I don't know how to start writing.		
22. I don't know what to do first.		
23. I don't feel able to organize my ideas.		

	I experienced this feeling	Comments
24. I don't recognize any pattern in my information.		
25. I do a lot of thinking before I write.		
26. My "thinking" often turns into day dreaming.		
27. I edit and polish each sentence as I write.		
28. I'm easily distracted as I write.		
29. Writing takes so long, I feel frustrated.		
30. The whole task feels so hopeless I quit.		

APPENDIX B

THOMPSON WRITING ATTITUDE SURVEY

Name _____

DIRECTIONS: Below are a series of statements about writing. There are no right or wrong answers to these statements. Please indicate the degree to which each statement applies to you by writing a number in the space at the left of each statement.

5....strongly disagree
4....disagree
3....neutral or undecided
2....agree
1....strongly agree

___1. Writing in a diary gives me a sense of having accomplished something with my day.
___2. I always do well in English Composition.
___3. When I write I can never find the right word.
___4. It is a joy to transform feelings by writing onto a blank piece of paper.
___5. Writing is not difficult for me.
___6. I don't feel I can find the right words to write what I want to say.
___7. Writing enables me to search myself more deeply than talking does.
___8. Writing is a chore for me.
___9. When I have to do a writing assignment I panic.
___10. I enjoy becoming involved with the flow of ideas in writing words.
___11. When I hand in a paper in class I hide it in the bottom or middle of the stack.
___12. People think my writing is childish.
___13. I can never seem to get my ideas organized.
___14. When I try to write I have trouble getting started.
___15. I can not satisfy the requirements of English teachers when I write.
___16. When I want to solve a personal problem I write all the issues involved.
___17. Writing helps me to decide what I think about a subject.
___18. Writing is freeing.
___19. When I am given a writing assignment I put off doing it until the last minute.
___20. I like to write my feelings about things in personal writing.
___21. I've always received good grades on writing assignments.
___22. My teachers make positive comments on my papers about my writing.
___23. Writing gives me a chance to convey my sense of reality.
___24. I enjoy writing when I have time.
___25. Discussing my writing with others is enjoyable.
___26. People who write well are people who think clearly.
___27. My writing makes sense to me, but not to my teachers.
___28. I avoid writing.
___29. Thinking about writing makes my mind go blank.
___30. I don't like my peers to read my essays.

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SCORING: Change the scores on these items: 3,6,8,9,11,12,13,14,15,19,27,28,29,30
changing 5 to 1
4 to 2
2 to 4
1 to 5
3 remains

Total all 30 items. The resulting scores could range from 150(high anxiety) to 30 (low anxiety). Standardized test scores : on Pre-test, a range 124-62 median 88,mean 88; Post-test, range 120-60, median 79 , mean 81.9.